

Back Cast

By Ron Wilson

There are dozens of firsts – from first fish to first love, which may be one in the same – adrift wherever memories go. And every so often, one works its way to the surface and escorts us pleasantly, or not, down memory lane.

Sometimes it's the darnedest things – the smell of bacon frying or a child crossing the street – that kicks a tidbit of memory loose and goads us into looking into the past. Other times, it's more tangible, like a magazine I received in the mail recently. In it was an article written by a longtime friend who introduced readers to his love for floating rivers.

"When you're ten years old, a perfect summer day is a dangerous time to meet anyone or anything: it's too easy to fall in deep, stupid, irrational love ... My friend had invited me to go fly-fishing with he and his father in a small green, wooden drift boat we'd named Moby because, well, because it was anything but as impressive as Moby Dick in the water," wrote Tony Ahern in *Sageland*.

The mention of Moby was my smell of bacon frying. I hadn't thought about that boat in years. It was my first of three McKenzie drift boats, and the only one I named, which had more to do with being young and impressionable than anything else.

The boat was an eyesore when we bought it, the equivalent of a rusted-out car up on blocks, with weeds growing through the trunk and a dog living in the backseat. There was a hole in one side a child could stick his head through, which, even the most novice boat builders will tell you, is a bad thing. The trailer was in equally rough shape, and the boat's oars were either busted or missing, I don't remember which.

But it must have been within our price range because Dad paid the man and we limped home.

To the pedestrian, a McKenzie drift boat resembles the more familiar dory – a flat-bottomed fishing boat with high sides. If that doesn't help, envision a wooden vessel in the shape of a crescent powered by oars.

We smartened up that boat with a ton of elbow grease fueled by romantic designs of floating the West's mighty rivers where we'd fly-fish for rainbow trout and steelhead. We were destined to become fly-fishing bums in the first order now that we were armed with a boat.

In the end, it didn't exactly play out that way. Moby made it to only one river, but it road her waves gloriously and scraped bottom along her shallow rifles countless times. The three of us had become fixtures on the river at a lazy time when you likely recognized most other anglers by the color of their boats, where they anchored, a peculiar hitch in their front or back cast ...



Things changed when the river became hip with the rubber rafting crowd interested only in whitewater – big waves that would eat the occasional boat and drown the unsuspecting. This summer "rubber hatch" maybe didn't ruin the fishing in the sense that too many rafts kept the trout from biting. But it did tarnish the ambiance.

Maybe that's when we started talking, or dreaming mostly, about taking our act elsewhere to places like Wyoming, Montana or Idaho where the fishing was supposedly better because, if nothing else, it was a long way from home.

A lot of things got in the way – work, money, time and eventually death – that kept Dad and I from loading up that old drift boat and striking out to waters we'd only read about. Three of the four things we likely could have overcome to make it happen, and I regret now that we didn't.

Maybe this story isn't about life's firsts and boats after all, but fathers. Guys who restored old boats on the chance the act might make a difference, but, unfortunately, were unable to hang around long enough to understand that it did.

Happy Father's Day.

